

# RollPlay



**GM NOTEBOOK**  
**ISSUE TWENTY**

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# 1

## **Welcome, Patrons!**

This month has been a “exploit your prep” sort of month for me. In *Court of Swords*, we’ve been following the PCs as they attempt to survive and manage their part in the War for the City of Brass, and while I haven’t had much new prep to do, I’ve been wringing a ton of mileage out of the prep we did before the live show. In this issue, I’ll touch on some of the things that have stayed the course, some things that have changed, and we’ll take a crack at updating the Fronts, looking forward to how the rest of this war is going to go. With *Nebula Jazz* over, my urge for that sweet sweet science fiction has been cranked up to the maximum and all I can think about is how excited I am for *Stars Without Number*. I’ve been doing a little pondering in the background and I want to share some thoughts about the noble houses that’ll be running the show in our new universe. Right now I’m just chomping at the bit, and want to be as ready as I can for when we get our new cast!

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 20 of the GM’s Notebook.

**Adam Koebel**  
**RollPlay GM**



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# 3

## Court of Swords:

# War for the City of Brass

As we expected, once things kicked into full swing with the Stranger Stars arc, the campaign setting became just rife with chaos and discord. Which, when it comes down to it, is a perfect background for adventure. When I first put together my notes for the current arc, I thought it likely that the PCs would choose a side - they'd join the Tower or the A'harisa or maybe they'd take the side of the Farang or turn to the Mara for power. I should have known better - it's been interesting watching the group of them dance back and forth between the factions. Since the momentum of the war is directly tied to their actions, the faction that most benefits

from their indecision is rising to the top of the pile. Of all the options, I didn't think that "Mara by default" would be the direction the story goes, but it's been very cool to chase the PCs around and show them what's up in the city.

As of the writing of this issue, the Fortress of Scarlet, the home base of the A'harisa has been destroyed following a catastrophe of shadow demons followed by a catapult barrage by the clergy of Judgement. The introduction of another priesthood into the equation got me thinking about the battle lines in heaven - where each Arcana's priesthood

might fall when called on to take a side in the war. There are, I think, three fundamental camps. There are those who have followed the Tower's lead and joined their Armada, who supply troops, magic and other aid to help destroy important elements of the city before the Farang are able to get to them. A second group directly opposes that group, their goal being to push out the outsider force and "save" the city. Lastly, I think there are Arcana who simply see the conflict as irrelevant, seek to play peacemaker or just have other things to worry about right now.



Breaking the Arcana down into those three lists nets us these results:

### **Destroy the City**

- The Hierophant
- The Emperor
- Strength
- Judgement
- The Hanged Man
- Death
- The Tower
- The Moon
- Judgement

### **Save the City**

- The Magician
- The Empress
- The Lovers
- The Chariot
- Justice
- The Devil
- The Sun

### **Abstainers**

- The Fool
- The High Priestess
- The Hermit
- The Wheel of Fortune
- Temperance
- The Star
- The World

Of these clergy, we've directly seen a few so far. Obviously the center of the conflict is the House at the End of All and the clergy of the Tower. They're convinced by divine prophecy that the City of Brass must burn and that

if it is not, its secrets and power will fall into the hands of the Farang, a group of interplanar locusts who are here to ruin everything. We know that the High Temple to the Magician has been destroyed, most likely because of the magical secrets it contains - burning the library so the enemy can't get their hands on the books therein. A smart move, but it deprives the city of a magical resource that, if someone were able to figure out a way through the Anathema network, might be useful. Ah, well, ashes to ashes. Whether it's become clear yet or not, the priests of Judgement and Justice came to blows over the fate of the A'harisa and Justice lost. So we have the executioner but no more judge or jury. Judgement is a dangerous and powerful ally of the Tower, especially since they raided the armory of the Chariot for its siege weapons. The Chariot is the patron Arcana of the A'harisa, so it makes sense that in order to remove them, that priesthood would need to be destroyed as well.

Right now, it looks like the Tower is on their way to a successful campaign, but we can't underestimate the influence of the Mara. They're a lot harder to fight, and as

the Tower has been distracted fighting with the other priesthoods, and with the secular authorities, they've been sneaking into the desperate hearts of the populace. They're an insidious foe and I'm so so excited to keep using them to undermine the city.

In a way, the Farang are being left to their own devices (hah) because of the civil strife, but with the A'harisa wiped out, it's a race, now - will the city be corrupted by devils, captured by the alien invasion or will the Tower succeed in lighting a fire big enough to burn out all the corruption that's taken hold? Only time (and the PCs ridiculous behaviour) will tell!



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# STARS WITHOUT NUMBERS

## BANS, ALLOWANCES AND HOUSE RULES

One of the first things I'll do after I read a rulebook and want to prepare for a campaign is come up with a list of Bans, Allowances and, if I've played the game before, House Rules. Inspired by the beginning of a game of Microscope ([www.lamemage.com/microscope/](http://www.lamemage.com/microscope/)) I want to lay out the palette with which we'll be painting our campaign. I'm not always totally strict about these - I want the players to get a chance to sway my opinion, but as a starting point, this helps me move things like D&D's "kitchen sink fantasy" style towards "Court of Swords" by banning certain classes or races off the bat. In this case, it's moving "sci-fi sandbox" more specifically towards "military sci-fi unique from Swan Song". Here's what I came up with.

## BANS

### Alien PCs

This is just a personal choice, for me. It's the same as it was in Swan Song and I think it's mainly in place because of two factors - on the one hand, I think

people have a really hard time playing alien species that aren't just "humans with bumpy foreheads". I think it's very challenging to play something that feels truly alien when that's all you can do. Even I have trouble with it, obviously, but since my NPCs aren't 100% of my contribution to the game, I can play them more as set pieces or scene elements than like, fully realized people. The other reason I don't like aliens as PCs is that I'm more interested in the ways humans are similar or different from one another than I am in how all humans are different from a particular alien species. Spacing Guild Navigators? Mutants? Cyborgs? Yes. Bajorans? No.

## AI

This is purely a ban based on the previous campaign. I'm not going to use big scary pseudo-deity style Shodan / HAL / skynet style AI because it's been done before. I'm going to limit AI in the game to something different, which we'll talk about when we get to Allowances.



## Magic

There are rules for space wizards. I love both space and wizards. There's a place for space magic, but this game is not that.

## Transhuman / Posthuman PCs

I'm keeping all the big weird posthuman stuff in an NPC faction for basically the same reasons as alien PCs, but also because the rules and narrative of this kind of PCs would be very different from the rest, and I don't want someone to be mechanically any more different than, say, a psychic and a non-psychic.

# ALLOWANCES

## Synthetic Human PCs

I specifically want to call out that this campaign has room for cylons and replicants. I'm going to allow players who want to be synthetic humans to make their human characters and then come to me in secret, where I'll give them the downlow on being a robot type person. These characters keep a deadly secret because thinking machines are outlawed in this sector and none are more hated than those that appear to be human. If nobody decides to go this way, there'll still be that wonder and suspicion but if

someone does, we'll have a fun side story to slowly reveal to the players and to you. I'm secretly hoping everyone decides they want to be a synthetic person, but we'll have to see...

## Augments & Cybernetics

While total body replacement and singularity-style upgrading isn't possible - this isn't Altered Carbon - I definitely want there to be a degree of technological augmentation available to my players. I want this to be a world where if you have access and money, you can change your body in all sorts of ways, provided you're still fundamentally human. I like sci-fi where people use science to be more than they could be without it, so I'm specifically encouraging players to explore that space.

## Military or Noble Backing

I want the players to feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves - part of a military or noble house. That family, unit, teams and crews are important and that these two specific things are ways they might be tied to each other. I want to encourage them to give themselves ranks and titles to differentiate and set them apart. It's much more fun to be a Duke or a Lieutenant, isn't it?



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## Court of Swords: Updated Fronts

An update to the ticking clocks of doom that count down to destruction in Court of Swords.

### The Armada

- ☒ Guerilla warfare against the Immortals
- ☒ Strategic targets - temples, barracks, miscellaneous and confusing-but-fate-relevant targets are destroyed by agents of the Tower
- ☒ The Aharisa are routed, its commanders killed
- ☐ The Palace of the Immortals is burned
- ☐ The Sanctum of the Immortals is pierced and they are slain
- ☐ The City of Brass burns, the Farang and Mara inherit the ashes

### The Immortals

These goobers are basically just in hiding right now, praying (to whom, exactly) for help saving their city. They're not really in a position to go out and do anything, but maybe there's room for one last big thing where they emerge like the Four Horsemen and start wrecking shit? If the PCs are interested, this is totally a way we could go. Otherwise they just hide like cowards until the marauders come.

### The Gold Faction Farang

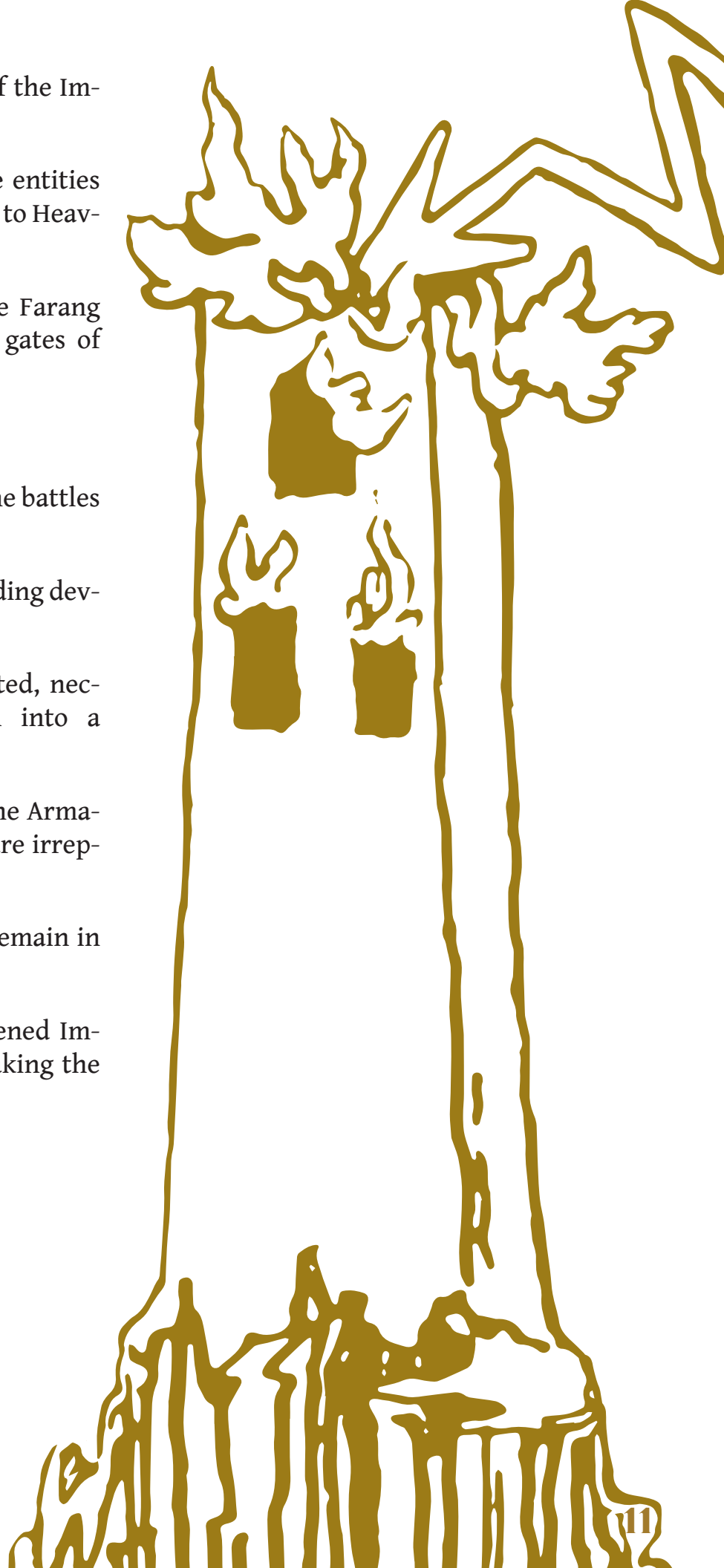
Time keeps on slipping...

- ☒ The Invasion begins with the lower districts, and the Anathem Network is erected
- ☒ Several Sahir switch sides and begin working with the Farang
- ☒ The Farang seize the Marketplace
- ☐ The Farang seize the Temple of the World

- ☐ The Farang seize the Palace of the Immortals
- ☐ The Armada and other divine entities in the City abandon it and return to Heaven
- ☐ The City is captured, and the Farang begin attempting to pierce the gates of Heaven

## The Mara

- ☒ Those who suffer most from the battles are turned from their fate
- ☒ The lower districts begin breeding devils and abominations
- ☒ The Aharisa becomes corrupted, necromantic magic turning them into a Mara-fuelled genocide squad
- ☐ The Farang are repelled but the Armada and Immortal defense plans are irreparably derailed
- ☐ The divine entities that still remain in the city flee for Heaven's safety
- ☐ The Mara strike at the weakened Immortals, corrupting them and taking the City for their own



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# UNNAMED SWN CAMPAIGN NOTES

## UNDER CONSTRUCTION

One indulgence I have been allowing myself has been pondering the factions I might see myself using in this upcoming campaign. I've started by organizing the Noble Houses of the sector, and giving them names and a basic concept. I chose to name them after constellations because I think maybe they took these names from Earth ships or colonies but have long since lost their connection to the original meaning. They're broken down into two types - Houses Major and Houses Minor, and in the game, that means there will be three factions made up purely of Noble born - one for each major house and one for all the minor houses together. I've also noted a major star within the constellation, in case I need a name to attach to the house (for a home planet or station, or a ship, etc.)

### House Aquila

No real idea about them, yet - their marker is the Eagle, so I'll probably let that inspire me and see what the folks who join that house come up with.

### House Crux

These dudes are gonna be the expansionist, aggressive, slightly-villanous-but-gets-shit-done House. They're one of the Houses Major and I think maybe the current Emperor (or whatever I call the title) is a Crux. They're also responsible, for whatever reason and however they managed it, for offing another house.

### House Cygnus

Of course when I needed a dead House, this one made the most sense.

### House Eridanus

The House of the River, maybe a banking or trade house.

### House Fornax

These guys are absolutely going to be builders and shipwrights - they're the ones who invented and perfected the modern spike drive and are making the best ships in space right now.

### House Lyra

Artists and creators.

### House Pyxis

I think explorers, probably a splinter House from Vela who decided they needed freedom to do their own weird thing. I bet these guys are real nerds for Earth lore.

### House Reticulum

If any House is gonna be assassins for hire and have cyberninja, it'll be these guys. They're the House of the Crosshair, after all.

## House Serpens

Venomous monsters or simply misunderstood ophidians? I think they'll be connected to the Psychic Academy somehow.

## House Triangulum

Mathematicians and scientists, I think. Dabble in maltech, terraform planets, obsess over computers.

## House Vela

These dudes are the sails, but they're not out there exploring necessarily, I think they own the libraries that contain all the star maps and nav data and have a business monopoly on that. I like the idea that they're mapmakers and keepers of the star-sea.

### RollPlay SWN

2/20/2018

the noble houses, descended from Ancient Earth, who rule the sector with grace and care:

- House Aquila (the Eagle) (Altair)
- House Crux (the Cross) \* (Acrux)
- House Cygnus (the Swan, dead house) (Deneb)
- House Eridanus (the River) (Achernar)
- House Fornax (the Furnace) \* (Fornacis)
- House Lyra (the Lyre) (Vega)
- House Pixis (the Compass) (Nautica)
- House Reticulum (the Reticule) (Zeta)
- House Serpens (the snake) (Struve)
- House Triangulum (the Triangle) (Delta)
- House Vela (the Sails) \* (Argo Navis)

### \* the Houses Major

Each house has a focus industry, plus a homeworld (though perhaps not exclusively). The Houses Major qualify as individual factions the Houses Minor are a council of Lords that make up a single powerful faction.

Houses ruled (in theory) by an Emperor figure, but it's mostly a remnant title w/ no real power.

# 7. SWAN SONG

## NOTES



### KX001-M

I'm not sure the Warmind retained the designation the Hierophant or evolved out of it as he got bigger and weirder, but this was where he got his start. I figured if we were gonna get all cozy with an AI I wanted to show the PCs that it might not all be sunshine and lollipops and that maybe AI existed that just wanted to turn a planet into dust.

### Ms. Mesa and Mr. Ossuary

It's always fun naming Pfotenhauer goons, and I remember distinctly chat debating and discussing what an ossuary was. I'm pretty sure a good chunk of the audience thought it was a large flightless bird from New Guinea.

### Ask Geoff...

One advantage of having a player connected to a faction is the fictional positioning and player authority opportunities I'd get throughout the game. This mission especially gave me opportunities in and out of the live gameplay to commiserate with Geoff about what he envisioned the Pfotenhauer to be like. Without his influence, they would have been both immeasurably different and likely a much smaller part of the campaign overall. This relationship with a player is always so nice - the ability to ask for details and

let your players fill them in for you is going to help connect them much more deeply to the universe. The text in red, below, is a quick note from a short talk Geoff and I had about the Pfortenhauer early on. Word-ing is mine.

### **Ms. Mesa Doesn't Recognize...**

A salient detail in using any Pfortenhauer character in the game was which side of the recent drama they were on. Obviously characters who were Titan loyal-ists (Titanites?) would have a very different reac-tion to the party than a group who knew the truth and would back Mr. Sicarian (Sicarii?) I think most of the Pfortenhauer troops would have turned him in, but I wanted to feature them, so these particular merce-naries were more interested in the weird obsession of their captain than any internal political strug-gle. Also, Mr. Sicarian has the bulletproof disguise of being THE COOK so how anyone would recognize him I don't know.

### **Typhoon Epsilon**

I tend to try and prep for the worst possible out-come, and then let the PCs pull back from that brink. In this case, I knew what would happen when the AI seized control and then we let it go backwards from there. Or at least, that was the intent. When it came down to it, Andoni ended up being pretty much as screwed as I had anticipated. As you can see in my very checked-off list of "bad things". What's inter-esting here is that we're essentially using a Front or a pre-Blades countdown clock. These sorts of pres-sure-indicators have always been a great GMing tool for keeping things tense.



## Swan Song: So2E03

- the setup: the package (KX001-M) from Andoni is the id-core of an ancient AI (known only as "the Hierophant"). the Swan Song is in the docking hold of the Pfotenhauer battleship "Harridan's Heart" captained by Mr. Ossuary. Also on board is Ms. Mesa, chief science officer and XO for the ship.

- > When the Swan Song docks, they're met by Ms. Mesa and a team of science crew. They're polite and friendly, telling the crew that as soon as they can verify the hardware, payment will be transferred.

(Ask Geoff what the ship's interior is like, what their uniforms look like, etc.)

(generally like grim space Hessians. Accused of being freebooters)

- > Ms. Mesa doesn't know or recognize Mr. Sicarian. Ossuary has, but remains neutral.
- > When the id-core is plugged in, it immediately breaks all the software firewalls and takes control of the ship's internal and external system and makes the jump to Andoni to "execute protocol Typhoon-Epsilon" (drop nuclear weapons on Andoni)  
*(planet busters)*
- > The Pfotenhauer crew are hindered, in part, by their systems being damaged. The ship contains many drone / robotic defense systems. The core is sealed, the computer deck shut and the protocol enacted.  
*LIFE SUPPORT*

### Timeline:

- ☒ the Hierophant takes control of the Harridan's Heart, begins to shutdown life support / vent atmosphere
- ☒ the ship drops into spike space, vents life support, ship temperature drops dramatically
- ☒ 19 hours to Andonian orbit, timer to stop TYPHOON-EPSILON
- ☒ the Hierophant is shut down / destroyed or ☒ planetary bombardment begins
- ☒ Andonian Orbital Defenses Deployed (fighter squads + planetary cannons)
- ☒ the Harridan's Heart jumps away once Typhoon-Epsilon is complete (headed for unknown space)

### Aftermath

- ① Andonian targets damaged (ancient sites, mostly, but several cities) death toll in the 10s of 1000s (40%)
- ② Andoni blames Pfotenhauer, declares hostility
- ③ Mr. Ossuary + Ms Fate (if alive) court martialled

### Stats:

Pfotenhauer Drone: hp 10; AC 3; AB +4; <sup>+5 to hit</sup> thermal "pistol" (25/50); PE 10; ME n/2; EV 8; Tech 12; Luck n/2  
Robot Defense: hp 20; AC 0; AB +5; heavy machine gun 3d6 \* (200/500) PE 8; ME n/2; EV 16; Tech 10; Luck n/2

*both have chafr launchers  
1000 rounds  
4 laser  
2d6 dmg*

*# suppress = 6 shots, everyone not in cover makes EV or LX save or auto-takes 1/2 dmg*



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